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HEADLINE: We can beat Iraq, but what for?

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BODY:

I recently traveled to Iraq, and as I saw Iraqi civilians on the streets of Baghdad, I could think only of what percentage of these innocents would be lying dead after a war with the United States.

There is little question that the U.S. military would be able to crush Iraq in a few short days - the world's largest superpower against a poorly defended Third World country. But in President Bush's quest of domination of Saddam Hussein, how many thousands of Iraq civilians will fall victim to the high-tech slaughter of "smart bombs" and other weapons of real mass destruction delivered by the U.S. military?

We saw small children in the cancer ward of the Baghdad children's hospital doomed to an early death because of the lack of medicine. That medicine has been blocked by the U.S. and British delegates to a review committee that is charged with monitoring imports into Iraq for the food-for-oil program. We learned from human-rights organizations that one in 10 Iraqi children dies before his or her first birthday, and one in three of these children suffers from malnutrition.

Rep. Nick Rahall, D-W.Va., and I traveled together. We impressed upon Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz that Bush was absolutely serious, that he wanted a war and that allowing weapons inspectors into Iraq would remove his reasons for invading. Although Aziz seemed a bit negative in responding to us, two days later his government announced that inspectors could come in without conditions.

That announcement perhaps slowed, but did not stop, Bush's drive to start a war. He is pushing hard on a compliant pre-election Congress for a resolution allowing him to declare war whenever and however he sees fit. This is all unprecedented in American history. We have had minor "incursions" before, in Panama and Grenada, but never has the Congress

written a blank war check allowing a president to fill in the blanks at his pleasure and upon his whim.

Senior Bush adviser Karl Rove has told Republican activists that the Republicans cannot win elections based on the economy and on corporate scandals. But they can win, in his words, on a war platform, which perhaps explains why, when Bush at first said weapons inspectors must be allowed into Iraq, he changed his mind and began demanding more concessions when the Iraqis agreed to allow the inspectors in.

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The Bush administration is using scare tactics. Iraq, despite the insane policies of the Saddam Hussein regime, has no bombers or long-range missiles that could deliver weapons of mass destruction. And there is no real connection between the fundamentalist al-Qaeda and secular Iraq. No one has yet presented credible evidence of a connection between the two.

An attack on Iraq would destroy the foundations on which the U.N. Charter rests. Should India decide to attack Pakistan, or should China decide to attack Taiwan, or should Russia choose to invade Georgia because of the rebellion in Chechnya, the United States will be stripped of moral standing to object to such aggression.

We will have, in fact, set a new, dangerous precedent in an already dangerous world - that one nation can with force change any regime of another nation it doesn't like. What Bush and his warhawks are proposing is to destroy the basic underlying principle of the United Nations - that there shall be no more aggressive wars between nations.

Those members of Congress who vote to give Bush an OK to start a war will also have a great deal of explaining to do when the U.S. economy goes into the tank because of high oil prices and the high cost of the war, and when American soldiers begin coming home in body bags. The costs will not end there, but will continue for years as America tries to establish a new government from the fractious entities now existing in Iraq. Further, if Bush is serious about the war on terrorism, the invasion he is angling for will certainly destroy any coalition with Arab countries that are helping us fight that war.

My hope is that there will be enough opposition to this war to stop it before it starts. If Bush is not willing to listen, then perhaps the Democrats in Congress, who, up till now, jump when they see their own shadows, will try to derail the war train before they, and we, are sorry.

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